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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF CURRENT INTELLIGENCE
20 March 1961

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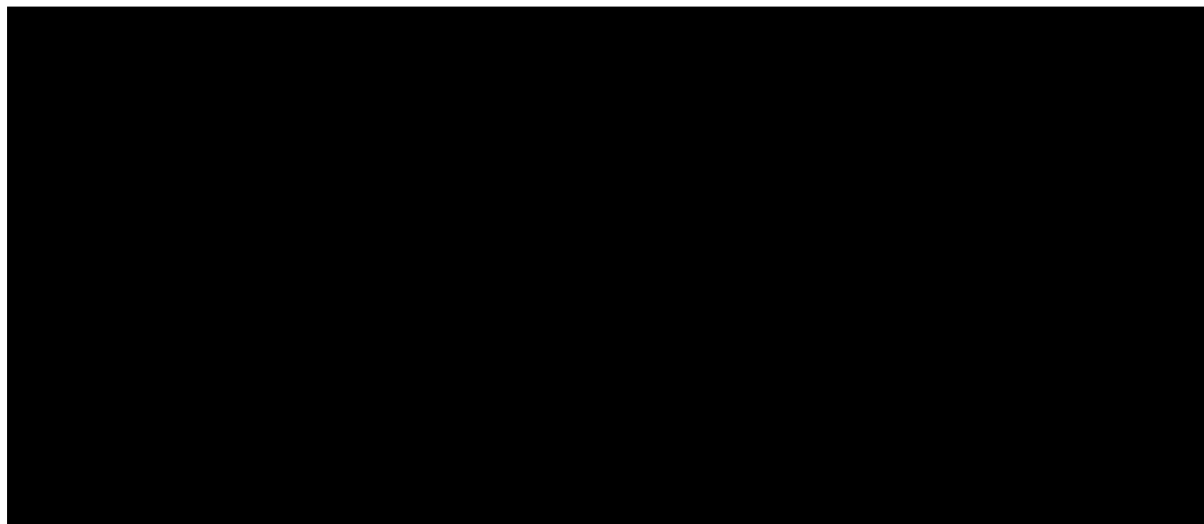
CURRENT INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: South Vietnamese Elections on 9 April 1961

1. Offices to be filled: President and vice president of the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam).

2. Parties or factions participating: There are three competing presidential and vice-presidential tickets, representing the government and independent candidates rather than organized political parties. President Diem, seeking re-election, will be supported by the progovernment National Revolutionary Movement, (NRM), the only large political organization in the country, and by the government's semiclandestine Can Lao (Revolutionary Workers') party. Some of the independent candidates have former ties with now virtually defunct opposition parties; one is a former official of the Cao Dai political-religious sect. There are no officially recognized opposition parties in South Vietnam.

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4. Present party strengths: The government virtually monopolizes political activity in South Vietnam. Of the 123 seats in the National Assembly, only six were won in the 1959 election by true independents. The rest were official or controlled candidates of the National Revolutionary Movement.

5. Principal issues: The principal issue in the election is the charge that the government is not ruling efficiently or successfully meeting the threat posed by Communist political and military activity. Although the opposition demand is for reforms to permit greater freedom of press, speech, assembly, and political organization and to reduce authoritarian rule, local corruption, and arbitrary arrests, these themes are likely to be muted as a result of careful screening of all election propaganda and posters by a controlled election committee responsible for conducting the campaign on behalf of all candidates. The Quat-Phuong ticket is proposing a reorganization of the army, apparently including a program of universal military training. Derogatory press articles alleging financial irregularities by Quat and neutralist sympathies and irresponsibility on the part of Truyen appear to be veiled government maneuvers to discredit opposition candidates.

6. Principal factors influencing the outcome: The election outcome is likely to be determined by Diem's control of government machinery and communications media.

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In addition to control of the only mass political organization, (the NRM), the government has political resources in its civic action program, the Republican Youth Corps, its clique of Can Lao officials, the military and psychological warfare organizations, and its influence in labor unions and other civic groups. Although each ticket is represented on the election committee, this important body includes representatives of the assembly who are loyal government or Can Lao members; its control of campaign expenses, campaign literature, and regulations also favors the government. Although there are provisions in the election law for poll inspectors, other provisions governing eligibility of candidates and voting tabulation can be turned to government advantage. Most members of the new constitutional court, which has a role in certifying the outcome, are appointed by Diem. While there is evidence of considerable rural apathy toward the government and some active urban and rural dissatisfaction with Diem, he is the only widely known candidate. It is generally assumed that the government has the means to assure its re-election.

7. Background: The 9 April election will be the first direct popular vote for presidential and vice-presidential candidates. Ngo Dinh Diem, who was serving as premier under the French-installed Emperor Bao Dai in 1954 when South Vietnam became an independent state under the Geneva agreements, proclaimed the Republic of South Vietnam on 26 October 1955. The proclamation followed a referendum held by Diem in which the voters were asked to choose between a monarchy under Bao Dai and a republic under Diem. The result of the referendum was announced to be 98.2 percent in favor of the republic. Under Diem, a constitution was drafted for the republic and promulgated on 26 October 1956. The constitution sanctioned Diem's first presidential term under the referendum and his appointment of Tho as vice president, and stipulated that Diem's five-year presidential term should end on 30 April 1961. It also provided for regular presidential and vice-presidential elections to be held at least three weeks before the end of the presidential term; under the constitution, a president and vice president can be re-elected twice. Candidates for vice president run in combination with presidential candidates as a single ticket.

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South Vietnam has held two previous elections for delegates to the National Assembly, on 4 March 1956 and on 30 August 1959. By-elections for the assembly were held on 17 February 1957 and 10 January 1960.

8. Informed opinion on outcome: The government ticket of Diem and Tho is expected to win. Although there is little information on the effectiveness of the campaign, which officially opened on 15 March, American officials report that press treatment to date has been formal and dignified toward Diem and Tho and derogatory in tone concerning the opposition. Even without official harassment of opposition candidates or rigging of election returns, the Diem ticket is undoubtedly the best known and is able to campaign under the guise of official duties.

9. Significance for US security interests: The defeat of the Diem-Tho ticket would probably be widely regarded as a repudiation of US policies and could have serious repercussions for US prestige as a result of American identification with an unpopular regime. At the same time, blatant rigging of the election by the government or the use of repressive measures against opposition candidates would also adversely affect US prestige and US efforts to foster more representative and stable government in South Vietnam. An opposition victory would introduce unknown factors. Neither opposition candidate appears to offer a promising alternative to Diem as a strongly anti-Communist leader.

Re-election of Diem could encourage him to stall further on political and administrative reforms believed necessary to rally effective popular support in an all-out effort to combat the Communist drive to overthrow him; on the other hand, an affirmation of public support might convince him that he is in a position to permit liberalization of his regime.

A major danger in connection with the South Vietnamese elections is the possibility of

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serious disruption by the Communists, including election boycotts or disorders, large-scale attacks during the election campaign, or an all-out political and guerrilla effort to overthrow Diem. There is also a danger that non-Communist opposition elements, believing there is no chance of Diem's defeat or frustrated by a Diem victory, may again attempt a coup d'etat which the Communists now are better alerted to exploit.

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